B2Bs meet resistance to change

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I recently had to help a five-year-old with a Web site called Lego.com. His big brother had been at the site, and he had seen that it featured a cool on-line version of the popular Lego Soccer game.

But when he typed in the address, he used spaces between the words and it didn't work. From his perspective, that made sense. After all, he is already learning how to write sentences — and the rules of proper punctuation.

His dilemma is indicative of the e-commerce challenges, particularly within the much-hyped area of business to business (B2B).

Let me explain.

In the business world, people have learned the rules, so to speak, of the corporate sector. Yet they are now faced with technologies and e-commerce business applications that change those rules and will change how they work.

To adapt, they have to be willing to accept change, and learn new ways of doing things — just like the five-year-old with a Web address.

Think about this in the context of the problems facing B2B portals or marketplaces that offer countless ways of doing business on-line.

Yet many such sites operate for a limited period or until the cash runs out, since the adoption rates are so low. In the United States, we're already seeing the collapse of many on-line marketplaces.

I've come to believe that's because many of those involved in building and pushing B2B initiatives have little appreciation of the complexity of the job at hand. It's almost as if they expect that they can establish a B2B portal and — poof — two million small businesses sign on and transform their purchasing activities overnight.

That doesn't happen because people need to be sold on the idea and need to clearly understand the nature of the opportunity — which takes time.

Even more challenging is the reality that countless people are resistant to change — any change.

As the experience with on-line shopping shows, some ways of doing business thrive on human contact. A purchasing manager, for instance, has built up a lengthy list of business contacts, and will often use those skills when sourcing product to get a good deal. You can't easily transform this innate human ability over to a Web browser.

And that's why, as B2B companies are discovering, it's all a lot more complicated than it looks.

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